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ABSTRACT

There is a growing need for imaginative and creative thought to support leadership among local school systems, and the faculty in educational administration at Washington State University are engaged in a leadership development program for AASA and the National Academy of School Executives. The ideas being developed cover the following areas: 1) the current defensive position of administrators resulting from mere reaction to adverse events; 2) the need to seize initiative and avoid defensive positions; 3) the feasibility of public leadership by school administrators to bring about educational improvements; 4) the focus on public leadership, rooted in active concern for improvement and implying much more than management of existing services and resources; 5) the involvement of lay leaders to supplement personal charisma; 6) some seminar and report objectives to clarify the need for leadership initiative, to outline ways to encourage it, and to arouse public interest and generate public support; and 7) exploratory concepts of "educational needs" likely to elicit public support. (MBM)

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LEADERSHIP

The public interest in education in the long range will be determined to a considerable degree by the caliber of leadership at the school district level. At a time when there are forces inimical to school administration at the local level, there is a growing need for imaginative and creative thought to support leadership among local school systems. This need is reinforced by a variety of conditions including those associated with the changing bases of authority for school executives, a growing emphasis on school system accountability, the need for clear vision and ideas about the political processes affecting education, and the challenge to school systems in competing for leadership talent.

The fact that political processes affecting education are visibly and intensely active today suggest still another reason why school administrators need to provide leadership on matters other than educational ones. Unless the political process is effectively informed by vision and ideas, the politics of bargaining and compromise are likely to keep educational progress on or near dead center. Concepts are perspectives which go beyond the short range views about consequences are needed in all efforts to achieve educational improvement. Thus as school administrators increasingly function in the political arena in ways that affect the public interest, the need for leadership ideas among school executives becomes even greater in importance.

The faculty members in educational administration at Washington State University currently are engaged in a leadership development program for AASA and the National Academy of School Executives. It is the intent at WSU to develop leadership training models which can be field tested through various NASE clinic programs and seminars. Faculty members at WSU are interested in sharing these ideas with members of the Washington Association of School Administrators. Hopefully WASA will commit itself to active participation in the leadership training program. The state association could provide the initiative to move other state associations toward positive action in the political leadership field. The ideas now being developed at WSU cover the following areas:

Administrators' Current Defensive Positions

Quite inevitably school administrators are deeply involved in "handling" a growing variety of problems--tax revolts, tight budgets, negotiations, district reorganizations and a dissonant caterwaul of criticism.

Those matters must be handled. But mere reaction to adverse events inevitably erodes administrators' capacity to exercise affirmative influence on educational developments. Much evidence indicates that presently such erosion is in process.

Need to Seize Initiative

Academy seminars and reports and other AASA efforts can help school administrators develop ways to take leadership initiative which will get them out of their presently defensive positions.

The feasibility and desirability of Academy effort to activate administrative leadership is substantiated by five sets of facts.

1. The experience of leaders and public communications practitioners demonstrates the importance of taking public leadership initiative in times of stress.

2. Such experience also demonstrates that in adverse situations mere reaction to problems and criticism tends to focus public attention on negative matters and to further activate critical public response. This tends to erode public confidence in school programs and in administrators. Both schools and administrators are pushed further into defensive positions. This is what has been happening in recent years--and is happening now.

3. But public interest in education is actually at a relatively high level. However, that interest is confused and frustrated by poorly focused, random and ill informed public discussion of criticisms and problems. Interest is not focused on what can be done to meet needs that are of personal interest to citizens.

4. Communication science and leadership experience demonstrate that public discontent and criticism are more affirmative than complacent; they can be transformed into purposeful interest and support. By initiating public consideration of unmet needs, administrators can focus public interest on constructive matters and generate public support for educational improvements.

5. History provides much evidence that in times of stress people seek a sense of direction that will relieve frustration. Problems and uncertainties are psychologically uncomfortable. People seek, welcome, respect and support suggestions that offer beneficial resolution of uncertainties. At such times bold leadership can shift criticism based on interest to active support.

Feasibilities of Administrative Leadership

Local, state and national school administrators can exercise public leadership. They can induce lay leaders to activate citizen interest in educational improvement.

In the present social-political structure of the U.S., school administrators are responsible for such public leadership. No other group can exercise it so well. But, as current events demonstrate, if administrators do not lead other groups will seize initiative. Much public attention will be focused on negative matters.

Superintendents and school boards, with advice of associates and lay leaders can conceptualize ways of activating broad-scale public support for educational improvements. They can also take initiative in organizing and maintaining efforts of other leaders to generate public support for improvements.

There can be no guarantee that every affirmative effort will quickly yield all desired results. But any competent behavioral scientist will predict that unless affirmative initiative is launched mere reaction to events will result in further deterioration of educational services and administrative organization.

Focus on Public Leadership

This suggestion for Academy and other AASA work deals with public leadership. The importance of internal professional leadership for program improvement is obvious, and is related to public leadership. But as current events and trends demonstrate, internal effort does not and cannot generate public support sufficient to maintain existing qualities of service, let alone improvements.

Public leadership implies purposeful and competent effort to induce layment to support the additional benefits pupils and communities can derive from improved educational services. Such leadership is rooted in active concern for improvement. More adequate schooling is the objective. Leadership implies much more than management of existing services and resources.

Involvement of Lay Leaders

The following ideas are based on consideration of various qualities and combinations of personal charisma and systematic effort to activate the interests and efforts of other leaders. That analysis indicates that most school administrators are most likely to get best results by considerate and systematic involvement of other lay leaders.

Personal charisma is a factor. But it is often over-rated. History suggests that with a few exceptions charisma alone yields few substantial or long-range results. Even Christ organized a cadre of disciples.

Some Seminar and Report Objectives

Academy seminars and reports, and other AASA efforts can help administrators and school boards:

Clarify the need for affirmative leadership initiative. This should include analysis of the results of mere reaction to adversity and criticism.

Outline and discuss ways superintendents and boards can take initiative.

Identify educational needs that will arouse public interest and evoke public support for improvements aimed at meeting needs.

Identify networks of lay leaders who can, and will, help generate broadly based public support.

Prepare factual descriptions of unmet needs and arrangements necessary to meet them for consideration by lay leaders.

Take initiative in organizing and maintaining the active efforts of lay leaders.

Keep them supplied with up-to-date facts and suggestions.

Report to them on responses to their suggestions (accountability).

Arrange for them to lead discussions at meetings of organizations and informal groups.

Make arrangements to get them public credit for their contributions.

"Exploratory Concepts of "Educational Needs" Likely to Activate Public Support

Any leadership team--local, state or national--can identify some major unmet needs and begin work by focusing effort on some for which a substantial public consensus presently provides a readiness for affirmative public response.

Here are some examples:

Improved occupational education. (Career education)

Services disadvantaged and gifted pupils need to become competent self-support adults.

Enough teachers and counselors to provide each boy and girl with the personal direction he needs to fully develop all of his capabilities.

Staff and facilities for early childhood education.

Such needs should be defined in terms of personal services. Emphasis should be placed on kinds of instruction and counseling pupils need. Impersonal matters like buildings and equipment can best be discussed after people are aware of the personal benefits involved.

All needs for improvement should be presented in terms of benefits accruing to persons-- pupils, parents, employers. All communication science demonstrates that prospect of personal benefits evokes more public interest and support than discussion of impersonal problems such as organization, finance or management. The public is affirmatively interested in benefits. It is weary of problems and would prefer to ignore them. The latter fact partly explains "the tax revolt" and indifference to the deterioration of some city school systems. So, affirmative leadership requires focusing public attention on personal needs and benefits that citizens perceive to be matters they care about.

Definitions of need should also include statements of actions and arrangements necessary to meet them.

Consensus strengthens public support and helps sustain it. Both past and present experience shows that public support will be strengthened by the degrees to which school administrators can help national, state and local lay leaders to agree on the urgency of some specific educational improvements.

Horace Mann generated a national consensus on the need for major improvements. At present there is a growing national consensus regarding a need for better occupational education and for providing all groups of pupils with the individualized instruction necessary for real equalization of opportunity. Likewise there is a growing acceptance of the view that all pupils need to acquire higher levels of occupational and civic capability.

Such national consensus functions to reinforce the interests and efforts of states and localities.

Consensus within states has similar effect in localities. Due to political organization and tradition it is easier to get relatively high degrees of consensus on the state level. At present, hundreds of "state programs" are influencing and evoking new efforts of thousands of lay leaders in thousands of localities.

However, local educational leadership need not be dependent on, or restricted to, improvements sanctioned by national or state consensus. Localities have a sense of identity. Hundreds of well-organized and well-informed local citizens councils have demonstrated the public support for improvement that can be generated by local leaders.

More can be done if some organization (the Academy and AASA) help administrators focus their limited time and resources on specific efforts most likely to yield results in present circumstances.